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SUBJECT: DEPUTY SECRETARY ARMITAGE'S VISIT TO SLOVAKIA

Classified By: CDA Scott N. Thayer for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: Deputy Secretary Armitage visited Slovakia September 14. During his meetings with Prime Minister Dzurinda, Foreign Minister Kukan, parliamentary leaders, and the media, he underscored that U.S.-Slovak relations are based on more than just coalition membership and reflect the shared values of the two countries. Useful exchanges were held on Iraq, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Russia, and a bilateral consular working group was agreed. End summary.

Prime Minister Dzurinda

¶12. (C) Prime Minister Dzurinda welcomed the Deputy warmly, noting that U.S.-Slovak relations are "the best in our history, but we should use your visit to make them even better." In that regard, he cited two "practical questions": the fact that Slovakia is the only country in the region never to have been visited by a U.S. President, and public displeasure over visas. The Deputy responded that visa policy was troublesome for everyone in the region and that he intended to take the matter up when he returned to Washington. Mr. Dzurinda later returned to the subject, saying that "some positive signal" is needed on visas.

¶13. (C) The Deputy then solicited Mr. Dzurinda's advice on the situation in Ukraine. Mr. Dzurinda expressed great concern--Slovakia (and the V-4) has tried to help maintain a western orientation, but Kuchma tells people what he thinks they want to hear. Mr. Dzurinda has created a special working group to follow the election process, is in touch with Yushchenko, and is supporting NGO efforts there. Many more observers are needed, but the key is convincing Kuchma that a transition must occur. Mr. Dzurinda recounted how, during his June visit to Kiev, Kuchma had painstakingly explained one-by-one why all bidders on the steel plant privatization were unsuitable, forcing him to pass it instead to his son-in-law. Regrettably, Ukraine continues to look to Moscow.

¶14. (C) The Deputy expressed concern about Russian pressure on Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and the Caucuses. Mr. Dzurinda agreed, saying that experience there is what has led him to decide that the planned privatization of the Slovenske Elektrarne power company cannot under any circumstances go to the Russian bidder. Putin, he said, is very different from how he was even a year ago.

¶15. (C) With regard to anti-American feeling in Slovakia, Mr. Dzurinda said that he believed public opinion was changing slowly. Speaking frankly, he expressed the view that public opinion was more negative on Bush Administration policies than the United States itself as a result of "some arrogance" but stressed that real leadership meant not following public opinion. He noted that Slovak support for NATO membership had dropped to 35% during the Kosovo campaign, and then rebounded to over 50%.

Foreign Ministry

¶16. (U) Foreign Minister Kukan hosted a working lunch for the Deputy and his delegation. Slovak participants were:

FM Eduard Kukan
Ambassador to the U.S. Rastislav Kacer
Director General for Bilateral Affairs Juraj Migas
Director General for European Affairs Maros Sefcovic
Director General for Security Policy Juraj Machac
Director of the Office of the Minister Peter Lizak
Director for West and South Europe and North America Peter Sopko
U.S. Desk Officer Viera Viskupova

¶17. (C) Visas: The lunch expanded on the themes discussed in the Prime Minister's office in a friendly, informal manner. Mr. Kukan thanked Mr. Armitage for his visit and for his media statements at the joint press conference with PM Dzurinda. Mr. Kukan reiterated the GOS request to establish a bilateral consular working group, to which the Deputy agreed and suggested the MFA announce immediately (at which

point Ambassador Kacer leapt from his chair and rushed to inform the MFA spokesperson).

¶ 18. (C) Ukraine: Mr. Kukan told the Deputy that the V-4 was in favor of sending 1,000 election observers to Ukraine under the auspices of Freedom House, and the Slovak MFA was encouraging NGO's to take part. This had the benefit of allowing the GOS to maintain neutrality, while providing

Slovak expertise to assist a free campaign and election. Slovakia also favors a parallel vote count. Mr. Kukan pointed out that Slovaks know and understand Ukrainians, but admitted he had not discussed the election with the Ukrainian FM. Mr. Kukan explained the need to secure Slovakia's Eastern border evoked fear in Ukraine about a new iron curtain that locks the country out of Europe. It is a sensitive issue to encourage economic cooperation and political dialogue while clamping down at the border, but the insight Slovakia had in dealing with Ukraine could be helpful in decision-making both in the EU and NATO. Trade with Ukraine is only 3 percent of total trade; Slovakia would like to increase it, but has to be certain Ukraine will pay its bills.

¶ 19. (C) Russia: Mr. Kukan said that Slovakia would also like to increase trade with Russia, noting he had been "summoned" to Moscow in October to hear Russian opinion about how EU membership had resulted in economic damages to Russia. Slovakia is dependent upon Russian oil and some minerals, so could be in a vulnerable position, but so far Russia had not applied any pressure. On the other hand, Slovakia was concerned by Putin's 9/13 speech, and agreed with the Deputy that Russia was not heading in a democratic direction. Mr. Kukan and the Deputy also commiserated about Russia's extreme reactions to the idea of a political settlement with Chechnya. In addition, Russia's lack of preparation and central government direction for dealing with events in Beslan was alarming.

¶ 10. (C) Balkans: Mr. Kukan said Slovakia was well-established in the Balkans, was assisting Croatia on the road to EU membership, and was closely following Serbia and Montenegro and Kosovo. He said the Serbs and Kosovars are in a Catch-22 on "standards before status." It was an explosive situation that needs to be stabilized; independence is the only solution, but probably as an international protectorate. Slovakia would maintain its 150 soldiers there, because without an international presence, war would break out. The Deputy asked if EU colleagues talked openly about independence for Kosovo. Kukan replied "final status" was heard frequently in EU discussions as a codeword for independence.

¶ 11. (C) Iraq: Slovak participants explained that military reform meant that 800 soldiers deployed abroad was the absolute limit. The Deputy asked if public pressure would be lessened if NATO accepted a training mission in Iraq, and received a resounding YES. Ambassador Kacer said a visit to Slovakia by an Iraqi official would be very helpful in showing the Slovak public that the deployment of Slovak troops is doing good. Mr. Kukan added that he had invited the Iraqi FM to visit Slovakia during his upcoming trip to Vienna. The Deputy suggested having him speak at parliament, just as the Iraqi PM would speak to the U.S. Congress, and said he would speak with Amb Negroponte to encourage such a visit.

¶ 12. (C) Israel: Mr. Sefcovic, former Slovak Ambassador to Israel, asked about Ariel Sharon's strength. The Deputy suggested that Sharon's decision to disengage from Gaza was intended to show the Palestinians were incapable of governing. He pointed out that within the EU and even other Arab countries there is a growing realization that Arafat is not helpful. The Deputy asked about the visit of the head of Israeli Knesset the previous week. Kukan had not met him, but noted his criticism of the EU position on the security fence.

¶ 13. (C) Turkey: DAS Conley asked about Slovakia's position on EU membership for Turkey. Mr. Kukan pointed out the EU report would be out in October and the decision would be difficult, but that Slovakia was sympathetic to Turkey's candidacy. The Deputy noted that the Turks had been dangling for many years and had a right to expect that there would be an unconditional date to begin talks.

Parliament

¶ 14. (U) The Deputy met with members of parliament from several parties:

Pavol Hrusovsky, President of Parliament (KDH)
Jozef Berenyi (SMK)
Robert Fico (Smer)
Miroslav Maxon (HZDS)

Pavol Minarik (KDH)
Karol Ondrias (KSS)

¶15. (SBU) The parliamentary leaders expressed their commitment to maintaining a strong Slovak-American relationship and conveyed appreciation for U.S. support for NATO and EU membership. Mr. Armitage thanked coalition leaders for supporting the democratic process in Iraq. Opposition MPs received the message that differing views on policies can be expected among allies and will not harm the fundamental nature of the bilateral relationship. Two themes emerged across the political spectrum: closer ties between legislatures and foreign policy after EU membership. Mr. Hrusovsky requested that as Parliament takes on a larger role in foreign policy, more opportunities be made available for meetings and exchanges. Mr. Maxon (HZDS) hoped that members of Congress will travel more often to Slovakia to provide information on developments in Iraq. Mr. Fico (SMER), the most vocal critic of U.S. and GOS policy in Iraq, stated that his party prefers foreign policy issues to be coordinated more closely in Brussels. The Deputy responded that the U.S. works closely with both EU and NATO and was happy to have two new fora in which to engage Slovakia, adding that most new member states valued both.

Media Roundtable

¶16. (U) After a "meet and greet" with Embassy staff, the Deputy met in roundtable format with five senior editors and foreign affairs reporters. Topics included the Slovak troop deployment in Iraq; visa policy; Saudi Arabia's efforts in GWOT; Russian President Putin's attitude toward Chechnya and his 9/13 statement on consolidating power, cooperation with Russia in GWOT, Iraq, and Afghanistan; whether the war in Iraq was a "miscalculation;" whether Iraq can become truly democratic; the U.S. attitude toward "New Europe;" Russia's relations with the EU; China's growing role in Europe and the world; and whether the security situation in Iraq would affect elections there. Complete transcripts of all media events are available in the Washington File.

¶17. (U) This message has been cleared by the Deputy Secretary's party.

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THAYER

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